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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the linguistic and legal framework in Spain and its attempts to define nationhood and a collective identity that encompasses its three major linguistic minority groups. The four major language groups of Spain are discussed with regard to official language policy and legislation. Article 3 of the 1978 Spanish constitution was heralded as a radical new recognition of linguistic rights and cultural pluralism, so long denied by the Franco dictatorship. Yet careful analysis of this article reaffirms that the politics of language in Spain remain contentious and ambiguous, in part because of the very language of politics itself. The pull between consensus and ambiguity is examined as is how this represents tensions between the core and periphery of the Spanish state and within the European Community. It is in the three major, non-Castilian territorial identities/cultures that the greatest activity in language planning efforts is taking place. Catalonia is the most active and the wealthiest of the three, Basque is the smallest, and Galicia has the largest native speaking population. It is suggested that the restriction of cultural identities to territorial identities is a questionable language policy for Spain. (Author/NAV)

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THE POLITICS OF LANGUAGE: SPAIN'S MINORITY LANGUAGES

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THE POLITICS OF LANGUAGE: SPAIN'S MINORITY LANGUAGES

Clare Mar-Molinero

Over the centuries language has always played a significant role in Spanish politics. The tensions between the minority languages spoken in regions on the peripheries, such as Catalan, Basque and Galician, and the language of the centre, Castilian, have illustrated the relentless drive to enforce a Castilian cultural and political hegemony on the emerging Spanish state, despite the undeniable fact that the Spanish territory is made up of various different nations. One of the most repressive centrist regimes in this tradition was that of the dictator Franco, whose rule imposed Castilian supremacy and proscribed all signs of diversity in the aftermath of the bloody Civil War of the 1930's and to a greater or lesser degree for the following forty years. Franco died in 1975, and, somewhat to the amazement of many commentators, Spain flung itself into the transition towards a fully-fledged western-style democratic regime. An essential part of this process was the drawing up and public ratification of a new constitution in 1978. As is to be expected of such a legal framework being written so soon after the end of the dictatorship, this is a document of consummate consensus and ambiguity, which attempts – and to a very large extent succeeds – to bring together the widely diverse aspirations, beliefs and identities of the Spanish people.

Article 3 of Spain's 1978 constitution has been heralded as a radical new recognition of linguistic rights and cultural pluralism by many commentators (see, e.g, Siguán, 1992). However, a careful analysis of this article confirms the view that the politics of language in Spain remain contentious and ambiguous, in part because of the very language of politics itself.

In the following discussion I will examine the pull between consensus and ambiguity which underpins the present linguistic legal framework in Spain, and how, as ever, this represents the tensions between the core and periphery of the Spanish state in its efforts to define nationhood and collective identity. I will emphasize, too, the fact that there exist many differences between the various minority language groups in terms of the successes or failures in their language planning efforts. All such discussions, too, have to be seen before the backdrop of the moves towards the so-called European unity in terms of

how this might affect the promotion of linguistic minorities and their relationships with dominant language groups.

The first clause of Article 3 states; 'Castilian is the official Spanish language of the State'[2]. With the naming of 'Castilian' and not 'Spanish' an important statement acknowledging the existence of various 'Spanish' languages is made, and one that has been bitterly disputed by many, not only on the political Right (see, e.g. Salvador, 1987). It is significant, too, that 'state' and not 'nation' is used, given the delicate and complicated relationship between language and national identity which is only too evident in the Spanish context. Political boundaries of a state are more easily defined than those of a nation. This clause, however, goes on to say 'All Spaniards have the duty to know it [Castilian] and the right to use it'. The radical tone of the first sentence is immediately counteracted by a starkly prescriptive directive in the second. It is difficult to find any national constitution worldwide which prescribes the **duty** to know a language. However, what is 'know'? Is it something purely passive requiring no active competence? How can it be demonstrated that a citizen does or does not 'know' a language? This is highly ambiguous and awaits legal interpretation and clarification.

Clause 2 declares that 'The other Spanish languages will also be official in the respective Autonomous Communities in accordance with their statutes.' Once again a refreshingly enabling definition of Spain's minority languages, never tolerated in the previous forty years, is qualified by the highly prescriptive constraint of limiting their official status to their own territorial space. This clear geographical limitation means realistically that the future role of the minority languages will always take second place to Castilian. It could even be argued that it contravenes the spirit of later articles of the Constitution which claim equality for all Spanish citizens. Article 14 of the Constitution, for example, states that

> Spaniards are equal in the eyes of the law, with no form of discrimination being allowed to prevail for reasons of birth, race, sex, religion, opinion or any other condition or personal or social cirumstance.

Those Spanish citizens whose mother tongue is not Castilian could argue that they do not have equal linguistic rights to those who are Castilian mother tongue speakers. A native Catalan speaker cannot insist on the right to use

Catalan in official contexts in, for example, Madrid. Native Basque speakers cannot expect the Spanish state to provide Basque teaching to their children if they happen to live in, for example, Seville. On the other hand, throughout the Spanish state Castilian may be used and must be provided for. What seems a benevolent policy to promote linguistic pluralism does in fact create linguistic reservations and supports the subordination of the peripheries to the Castilian core.

As if to counter the potential negative sense of the second clause, the third one confirms a belief in linguistic plurality when it states: 'The richness of Spain's different linguistic varieties is a cultural heritage which shall be the object of special respect and protection'. Fine words which may serve to enable real actions, but, more cynically viewed, may mean nothing. Again legal interpretation of such concepts as 'respect' or 'protection' is needed.

However, it is probably fair to say that this final clause has permitted a new and imaginative understanding of Spain's linguistic map. It allows Autonomous Communities to define their local linguistic variety, and even when this is not considered a discrete separate language from Castilian, its own particular features can be recognised and protected. This has inspired work on lexical and phonological features in, for example, Andalusia and the Canary Islands, in order to draw up guidelines on what constitutes these regions' respective language varieties. The implications of this for such fields as education and the media is very significant, raising such issues as those of standard versus local language varieties, and forms of acceptable literacy, issues which have constantly plagued educators and language planners, not to mention politicians.

Despite these ambiguities in the constitutional framework there is no denying the substantial advances that have taken place since 1978 in the promotion and status of Spain's minority languages. It is notoriously difficult to agree a definition for the term 'language', but, most usefully for this discussion, it can be equated with the linguistic code of a speech community of a significant size and with, therefore, some political influence. In this sense it is generally accepted that Spain contains four such 'languages': Castilian, Catalan, Basque and Galician, although arguments in favour of Asturian and Aragonese, for instance, or for Galician to be a 'dialect' of Portuguese will always remain. Significantly the Francoist ideology termed Catalan and Galician 'dialects' in

a clear attempt to downgrade their status to a category normally considered inferior to a language.

It is in the regions of the three non-Castilian languages, the so-called 'historic' communities, where the greatest activity in terms of language planning efforts is taking place. These efforts are supported not only by Article 3 of the Constitution but also by the relevant Autonomy Statute and, in particular, by the local Linguistic Normalization Laws. There are many similarities as regards this legal framework and the areas of linguistic activity through which language planning is being pursued, but there are also important differences as should be expected when recognising that the various Autonomous Communities are not homogeneous and display marked differences.

By far the most active and apparently successful language promotion programmes are taking place in Catalonia, which is unsurprising given that it is the largest and wealthiest of the three relevant communities. The Autonomous Community of Catalonia has more than six million inhabitants, of whom approximately 90% claim to understand Catalan, whilst over 60% admit to speaking it in some form (for data on language distribution throughout Spain, see EC Commission, 1990). As in the Basque Country and Galicia the local government has set up a Directorate to coordinate language promotion programmes and is encouraging the teaching of and through the medium of Catalan, the development of modern terminologies in Catalan, the use of the local language in all government and administration and official public use, as well as through the media. The results are spectacular: the rise in the number of schools offering some or much of their curriculum through Catalan is sharp; most public notices, street names, menus, bank cheques, entrance tickets, etc. are in Catalan (sometimes exclusively, sometimes bilingually). There are two Barcelona and one Gerona daily papers in Catalan, two television channels uniquely in Catalan and a third giving some programmes in Catalan, there are also numerous Catalan local radio stations. Theatre, cinema and written publications flourish in Catalan. Significantly, much of this includes translations from languages other than Castilian (*Neighbours* or *The 'A' Team* dubbed in Catalan; Marx or Proust translated).

Catalan has always been the language of all the Catalan population, including, signficantly, the upper and middle classes, and in this sense, it is importantly different from Basque and Galician, and in fact from most comparable

sociolinguistic situations. This has meant that the language can serve as a symbol of social mobility and acceptance with the ensuing favourable attitudes to its use and teaching. This has undoubtedly helped overcome its single greatest obstacle, which is the large non-native Catalan speaking immigrant population now found resident in Catalonia. This has obviously diluted the spread of the language, and especially in the urban industrial areas where these immigrant groups are concentrated. However, unlike Basque, but like Galician, the accessibility of Catalan for Castilian speakers has helped provide a very high incidence of passive knowledge of the language by the region's population.

Nonetheless, Catalan shares, albeit to a lesser degree, with Basque and Galician (and in fact with many other minority languages) the challenge of mass communications in modern technological societies. Satellite television, international travel, computer technology, multinational business creating the so-called global village inevitably weaken the role of lesser-used languages and strengthen the position of world languages, such as, above all, English. Castilian is of course a widely spoken world language and therefore to compete with it or aspire to societal bilingualism with equal status for both languages (as stated in the Language Laws' objectives in the respective Autonomous Communities), is arguably an impossible goal.

With fewer than two and a half million inhabitants the Basque community is the smallest of the three where a minority language is being promoted. Fewer than 25% of these claim to speak Basque, reflecting the difficulty of access of the language which, unlike Catalan, Galician and Castilian, is not part of the Romance language continuum. The language has considerably less prestige and status than Catalan within its community, and significantly has not until recently been seen necessarily as a core value of Basque nationalism, although during the sixties and seventies the language was boosted with a certain kudos by being a symbol of the nationalist movement ETA (See Conversi, 1990). Another positive devlopment dating back to the sixties was the introduction of Basque schools, teaching Basque and providing a curriculum through the Basque medium. These schools are known as *'Ikastolas'* and were an important attempt to promote Basque identity, originally as largely clandestine groups, and then increasingly throughout the sixties and seventies as private organisations, often working as non-profit making parent cooperatives.

However, there is no strong literary tradition in Basque, and the codification of the language and selection of a standard variety from various competing dialects is very recent. All of which has made the teaching of Basque and the use of it in public life very much more difficult. The Basque Country also has an important non-Basque immigrant population who have been slow to want to learn Basque, which has, unlike Catalan, been associated with rural areas and backward traditionalism. There have, nonetheless, been improvements and successes as Basque is promoted through the education system (there are now state-funded *ikastolas*), and used in local government wherever possible. But the obstacles to the learning of Basque create the sense that its promotion is above all symbolic rather than practical.

Galicia like the Basque Country contains a small population, but by way of contrast has not been affected by immigration, and therefore a very high percentage speak the language, some 90% of its nearly three million population. However, Galician lacks status and therefore is not used for social advancement or for more educated literate purposes, except by a tiny minority of middle class intellectuals. The language planning activities, similar in conception to the Catalan and Basque ones, are attempting to counter these attitudes. However, an important difference in the case of Galician is the existence of a society which has known heavy emigration, leading in general terms to a conservative 'holding' mentality, particularly with womenfolk waiting for the return of the perceived head of the family. Such a predominantly rural society has not encouraged belief in cultural independence and confidence. Moreover, what changes are now taking place as a result of the new language policies must also be seen in the context of a counter movement by the so-called 'Reintegrationists', a small but vociferous group who romanticise the need to return Galicia and Galician to the fold of Mother Portugal. Neither the reintegrationists nor the isolationists (those who see Galician culture and language as separate from either of their larger neighbours) are able to substantially counter the influence and dominance of Castilian.

Clearly issues of national and group identity are present in all these activities to promote and protect minority language rights in Spain, as they are also in the determination of the Castilian centre to allow linguistic independence only up to a certain point. By limiting the promotion of non-Castilian languages to discrete geographical areas, the continued domination of Castilian as 'national'

language is ensured. The minorities' cultural identities are only acknowledged when they are linked to territorial identities. In a world of increasingly changing populations this is a questionable principle.

Indeed the linguistic map of Spain needs to be analyzed with two other elements in mind: the role of ever-increasing groups of immigrants, and the effect of a more closely integrated European Community. On the one hand the likely change in political power structures within the Community seems to point to the emergence of a Europe of the Regions, where the traditional national state centre will be increasingly bypassed through a relationship between the European supranational centres of power and the local regional centres. This is viewed by Catalans, Basques and Galicians as a real possibility for the strengthening of their particular cultures and languages, and is to some extent backed up with Community resources such as regional aid and initiatives like those pursued by the European Bureau for Lesser-Used Languages and the Mercator Project. Both these latter aim to improve knowledge and research about Europe's minority languages, sponsor the teaching and learning of these languages, and foster relations between those groups using them.

On the other hand, however, a major premise of the European Community is the encouragement and right of the freedom of movement of persons within the member states. This policy must have language implications, above all challenging the notion that linguistic and cultural identity can be tied to one geographical space. Added to this is the situation of the significant numbers of non-European immigrants, many of whom do not speak as their mother tongue the language of any member state. Spain has only recently begun to experience the social and cultural effects of such immigration, largely with groups from North Africa and Latin America. In the case of the latter, of course, language is not an issue, but it is becoming a very serious one in the case of the former. If Spain is to honour the spirit of the EC's 1977 directive encouraging all member states to provide at least some mother tongue education for the children of immigrants, this will put a strain on the delicate balance arrived at between the present national language and the minority ones, a balance by no means viewed by all as ideal but one which underlines the fraught relationship between language and constructs of national identity.

Notes

1. A version of this paper will appear in Graham, H. and Labanyi, J. (Eds.) (in press) *The Struggle for Modernity: an Introduction to Spanish Cultural Studies*, Oxford (O.U.P.)

2. All quotations are from the 1978 Spanish Constitution and are translated into English by the author

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